

# Touched Out and Tired

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“I can now understand why some women love polygamy.”

These were the words of a young mother, still in love, but unable to feel any desire for her husband’s affections. The bedroom temperature had certainly dropped a few degrees.

A question I always ask when seeing couples who have grown apart is, “How did the birth of your child affect your relationship?”

Sometimes the answer is clear; there is a definite negative spiral in the relationship. In some instances the answer is less obvious. A bit of gentle probing often reveals the start of misunderstandings. This is a time when both parents are going through profound adjustments, the individual needs change, and oftentimes the needs of the parents are geometrically opposed.

It can be quite a shock for many women to find that their sexual libido seems to go into a complete slump. There are times when life in a convent seems the better course of action. Not only does desire decrease, but there can be a complete antipathy to any sexual contact.

The husband, on the other hand, wants his wife back. If there have been complications in pregnancy, he may have had to lead a celibate life to prevent further damage. The intense bond between mother and child might also leave him feeling left out and ignored. For a husband sexual intimacy is a way of experiencing love and acceptance. He has a physical need to know that he is still important and an integral part of the unit.

Some couples are able to muddle through this period of immense adjustment, but for many it starts a spiral of resentment where neither feels understood.

At this point it is important to look at what is happening at every level to understand both partners’ situation. The most toxic way of approaching this dilemma is to blame or to preach about duty. Female sexuality is extremely complex. It is not only affected by changing hormones, it is also affected by emotion. The post birth period is filled with intensity at both levels. It could be said that pregnancy and childbirth take women through an emotional storm. A newcomer in the hormonal onslaught is prolactin. Prolactin is essential for breast feeding, but it is also a libido killer. Interestingly, men with pituitary tumours and high prolactin levels have no interest in any sexual contact.

The evolutionary reason for the loss of libido might well be that our earlier ancestors could not watch, feed and care for more than one infant or toddler at a time. It was nature’s way of spacing children. In our earlier evolution, this helped to maximise the chances of survival. Polygamy was also a way of maximising in survival. This meant that there was an in built community in the family structure. This is not a reason to stop breast feeding. The benefits of breast feeding far outweigh the disadvantages. It is, however, important to understand the physiology in order to open up communication and lessen resentment.

Another reason for the loss of libido is simply being 'touched out'. The infant and toddler are frequently in touch contact with the mother.

One mother stated, "I feel as though I have lost my body". It is not only the physical touch that can become quite draining, it is also the child's need for constant contact that leaves the young mother feeling starved for a bit of non contact 'me time'. Who does not remember their mother stating, "All I want is peace and quiet".

I remember asking a friend how old her young child was. "Old enough that I can shut the toilet door" was her answer.

This constant close proximity of the infant and toddler can leave the mother feeling touch averse with any other person in her life. The father on the other hand wants the intimacy that existed in the early relationship. This can lead to resentment, guilt and a gradual moving apart.

The lack of sleep is another big reason for a flagging libido. It is no wonder that sleep deprivation was used as an effective torture of political prisoners. We need our sleep as much as we need food and water. Some young mothers are seriously sleep starved, particularly if they have a sickly or restless infant.

There is also the possibility of a depressive disorder creeping in after the birth of a child. Post-natal depression is frightening for everyone involved, including the father. In extreme cases there may be severe paranoia and even psychosis; that is, losing touch with reality. In cases of extreme fear or anger, medical help must be sought immediately.

Pain in intercourse is another big problem after birth. Women who have had an episiotomy to help with the birth understand that there is possibly healing scar tissue. However, it comes as rather a surprise to women who have had caesarean sections when they too experience pain with intercourse. This is partly hormonal and party the added stress of caring for a new infant.

The new father also has to go through major adaptations without the benefit of bonding hormones. These changes can be psychologically draining and he may well be confused by his wife's personality shift. As much as the father is probably delighted with the new child, many fathers are unprepared for the extent of adaptation needed.

Fathers are not always equipped to deal with the many emotions that they feel during this period. Some experience this as a rejection and withdrawal of love. In such cases, I find that fathers tend to resort to withdrawal, or intrusive behaviour. The father that withdraws might look as though he is coping. Very often work gives a safe escape and it might even be easier to work longer hours than come home to a frustrated and weepy wife. This is a dangerous time for straying outside the relationship for comfort. The intrusive response might well take on the form of negative criticism. The internal sense of disquiet and insecurity gets projected onto the new mother. It seems as though she can do nothing right. There might also be unwanted sexual advances leading often to increased resentment.

Sadly, many couples have not had adequate experience to know how to deal with this situation. It is easy to talk about issues with the baby, but issues with the relationship get buried under mounds of guilt and anger. If there could be a greater understanding, a lot of heartache could be avoided. It could also save many relationships.

The first thing is to understand that this is not forever. Once couples realise that desire will return, humour will come back and the baby will grow into the family, they are more able to take one day at a time. This is the start of a new journey and anything new has steep learning curves.

It is also helpful to recognise that so many of the emotional responses and the lack of libido are linked to physiological changes. As the body returns to normal, so does libido. In actual fact, many women find that their libido peaks later in life as the pressure of infancy and child rearing are over.

Many more traditional cultures are more attuned to nature and natural responses and have definite rituals and structures to protect the young family. This community involvement and support leaves them feeling less alone. Unfortunately, the small nuclear family often has to stand alone, a fragile structure ready to break.

It is important that the communication channels are kept open. This is not a time for finding out whose fault it is, but simply finding a way to work through difficulties. The term 'constructive engagement' could not be more pertinent. Recognising that the negative feelings are a part of the process and not anybody's fault is essential.

I encourage couples to start as early as possible with a weekly date night. It might mean finding a good baby sitter, but the benefits will far outweigh any cost. It need not even be an expensive evening; a simple walk in the park could be enough. The tone of the evening is often set in the first few minutes. Two tired parent's wanting acknowledgement but with few emotional reserves left over to give is another potential pressure point. I encourage parents to do something to lift the mood and break the negative tone. Babies usually love the motion of a pram. One simple daily walk around the block is enough for both parents and the baby to relax. It is vital to do something to bring in a positive and relaxed atmosphere. I do tell men that the best aphrodisiac for women is understanding communication. Don't worry about the oysters.

Another great help to a woman's flagging libido is role swapping. Taking over the care of the infant or toddler allows for bonding between dad and the child and the other has a chance to feel more adult and less like just being a mom. I often find that fathers tell me that they want to help, but are criticised about how they do things with the baby. The most important thing is not how things are done, but attitude. An involved and caring father is one of the greatest gifts a child can have.

We live at a time when the extended family is disappearing. Many people live and work far from family and friends. I find that many young mothers are lonely. This is a recipe for depression. There are many groups available focusing on moms and tots. It does not need to

be a money based group. Religious organisations often have programs for young mothers, as do community centres. The issue here is not what you believe, but just to get out and socialise. We are social animals. We need the communication to live. This also assists in lifting the mood and self esteem. Talking to other people experiencing similar problems is vital to bringing back a sense of self.

This is an important time for mature love to develop. Although some women are touch averse, they do not mind touching. Learn to experiment and play. Not every contact needs to end in intercourse. Some women avoid even the slightest contact for fear it will arouse their partner/husband's expectations. Talk about how contact can be made and different possibilities. It often happens that when a woman feels comfortable with expectations, her sexual response does return as she feels less defended.

This is a vital period in a young couple's life. Honest and understanding communication that is problem solving rather than blaming will go a long way to keeping a couple together. I heard a wonderful term recently - 'redemptive listening'. Just listening without judgement will go a long way to bring back the bedroom magic.